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## Yoga: When Upside Down is Right Side Up

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**By Barbara Lyon, Naval Medical Center San Diego volunteer yoga instructor**



Photo of Barbara Lyon, NMCS D Yoga instructor. (Photo by retired Marine Cpl. Matt Dominguez, formerly assigned to Wounded Warrior Battalion-West, NMCS D detachment)

Have you ever found yourself in a position you never thought that you would be in?

Twenty eight years ago I walked into a yoga studio, encouraged by my husband to give it a try. Why would I want to try yoga? It did not sound interesting at all. Trusting his judgment though, I attended the class and found it to be an amazing experience. I felt more energy and yet relaxed at the same time. Today I still attend classes at the same studio.

My husband, Jack Lyon, and I began volunteering at [Naval Medical Center San Diego \(NMCS D\)](#), adjacent to Balboa Park, in 2004 through the Armed Services YMCA. We were meeting medevacs and assisting with the wounded warriors and their families. In a support group for wives, I began sharing restorative yoga poses and breathing techniques. The wives seemed to breathe more deeply and felt relaxed after each session. I soon had the idea of beginning classes for the wounded warriors themselves- but would they be willing and open to it? I know the

warrior heart and was determined to share what I had learned.

To my surprise, I found that there was an existing interest in providing yoga classes at NMCS D. The [USMC Wounded Warrior Battalion-West Detachment](#) was supportive of the idea from the beginning. Betty Michalewicz from the NMCS D Health and Wellness Department was looking for a teacher to begin classes for wounded warriors in the [Balboa Warrior Athlete Program \(BWAP\)](#). This turned out to be a perfect match and the first yoga class began.

The initial classes were for the warriors specifically and they were amazed at the workout they received. Additionally, many fell into deep relaxation—their first in months—during the final restful pose of “savasana”, one Marine shared that this was his first “let go” since he deployed to Iraq . That moment of peace and serenity—of being home— is the payday for me. The Warriors learn to take ownership of their body—missing parts and all.

When NMCS D began to receive more amputee patients, the yoga class at [Comprehensive Combat and Complex Casualty Care \(C5\)](#) began. The amputees could easily work on the platforms in the physical therapy room. Some were strongly drawn to the practice and were soon performing postures that they never thought possible, such as headstand and

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shoulderstand. The inverted poses are supported and individually guided and have proved to be a valuable addition to their healing program by providing enhanced circulation, drainage of toxins and numerous other benefits .

One Marine lieutenant refused to come down as it was the absolute first time he had been pain free. Yoga is something new to most of these warriors and being successful in poses that initially seemed unattainable provides a real feeling of accomplishment. One powerful aspect of yoga is that while working on the practice, the mind is concentrated and is free from the worries and concerns of other aspects of their recovery-it is an inside job. It is like a 'shower for the mind', as one attendee said.

My teacher of 28 years, Sunny Keays, joins me for the C5 classes and we both love the gift of sharing with these warriors in a joyful, relaxed and mind-opening class of yoga. Most attendees are astounded by the exhilaration of a powerful work-out they receive—this is definitely not “sissy” Yoga – this is for real. Right here, right now—and that is a space they know and honor.



Photo of Staff Sgt. Mark Zambon at the summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro. (Photo courtesy of Staff Sgt. Mark Zambon)

It has been six years since the first class, now four yoga classes are offered each week at NMCS. The yoga classes are open to wounded warriors, patients referred from medical departments, family members and staff. Classical hatha yoga, the physical yoga, is combined with breathing techniques to provide attendees with a complete body mind connection and

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experience. The inverted poses we teach to the amputees are also emphasized for all participants as they are powerful poses for all to enjoy. Inverted doesn't have to mean standing on your head and milder inverted poses are also taught. The simple posture of lying on ones back and extending the legs up a wall can be relaxing, rejuvenating and the very best way possible to let go of stress and bring closure to a busy day.

Regular attendee Staff Sgt. Mark Zambon shares, "The practice of Yoga ensured that I was mentally prepared and in a robust physical state prior to taking on my successful climb of Mt. Kilimanjaro. I made impressive gains in range of motion, strength and health as a whole while recovering from a bomb blast that took both of my legs. The powerful meditative aspect of the practice helped still my mind and to be present in the moment and so very refreshed."

Sgt. Jimmy Bernard states "I am more aware of myself, others and my surroundings. Practicing Yoga has had a positive impact on my recovery, my well-being and on the lives of myself and my family."

Looking at life's challenges from a new perspective, a different position, can be enlightening. Suddenly one realizes that everything is right side up.

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